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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement by the International Council of Women and the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. The member organizations of Project Five-O, the International Federation of Business and Professional Women and the International Council of Women, which hold consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, reaffirm the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on the fifteenth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), whereby Governments committed to: eliminate violence against women; enhance the position and numbers of women in power and decision-making; and institute mechanisms for the advancement of women.

2. Since 1980 the Project Five-O partnership has provided vocational training, education and employment opportunities for thousands of women and girls in developing countries and the countries in transition. Through locally based programmes funded by Project Five-O, women and girls of all ages have acquired the skills necessary for their economic security and personal development. They have gained the confidence to enter more fully into the activities of their communities, thus influencing the decisions that affect their lives and the well-being of their families. Building the capacity of women within their communities has been at the heart of Project Five-O's mission and the organizations take pride in this long-term and ongoing commitment. The partnership prepares and supports local, national and international advocacy initiatives that make a positive difference to the lives of women and their families. In addition, members, within their own organizations, carry out their programmes in awareness-raising, advocacy and action in order to advance the status of women.

3. Many of the women helped by the partnership have had to take on the responsibility of heads of households, becoming the bread winners and the caregivers for the sick. They were often ill-equipped to take on these tasks. Project Five-O programmes provide the training and support to enable the women and girls to meet these challenges. The partnership believes strongly in the empowerment of women and girls through education and training, enabling them to have better employment opportunities and to make informed decisions about their reproductive health and the number and spacing of children. The Project also applauds the fact that, year after year, girls in greater numbers are now in primary education in developing countries, and it urges national Governments to renew their efforts to make secondary education accessible for all girls. Project Five-O also calls on Governments to make a collective commitment to work with the private sector to increase the proportion of women in decision-making roles on all levels.

4. Project Five-O is keenly aware of the vulnerability of women and girls in the global level of poverty, underdevelopment and lack of education, which, in some societies, is worsened by armed conflict, natural and manmade disasters, gender inequality and violation of human rights. Project Five-O supports, without reservation, the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS adopted by the General Assembly in 2001 at its special session on HIV/AIDS. The Declaration outlined measures to be taken at national, regional and global levels to curb the spread of AIDS and reduce its impact on society. Reports reveal that females suffering from HIV/AIDS now outnumber men and that, of all the new cases, 40 per cent are between the ages of 15 and 25 years of age and the majority of those are women. Of great concern to Project Five-O is the impact of these figures on family life and the

development of communities where women are the mainstay, the carers and, increasingly, the breadwinners.

5. Project Five-O is concerned that progress towards the Millennium Development Goals in the current global economic climate presents a reduction in commitment and resources. A worldwide economic slowdown diminishes the income of the poor, pushing more families into poverty. Some advances of course cannot be undone. Debt, once cancelled, cannot be reinstated, and primary education completed cannot be taken away. The problems facing many Governments at this time must not detract from the long-term efforts of the international community to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

6. Project Five-O urges national Governments to remain focused on breaking the circle of poverty by encouraging initiatives that empower and enlighten women through education and vocational training that enable families to thrive and sustainable communities to develop. Gender equality that recognizes, respects and values the traditional caring role of women is essential to developing shared responsibility within families and communities. Gains already made in establishing such gender equality will be eroded away if the political will of Member States is lacking and financial resources are not maintained.

7. Violence against women has been recognized in the Beijing Platform for Action as an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. Non-governmental organizations have urged the United Nations to recognize violence against women as a human rights violation and, as a result, Governments are introducing legislation dealing with domestic violence and establishing commissions to address violence against women.

8. Project Five-O has worked with a wide range of partners to advance women's human rights, empower and help women access social and economic opportunities, free of violence, poverty and discrimination. The system as it now exists is simply not working well enough to deliver effective results to improve women's lives around the world. It urgently needs to be improved and strengthened.

9. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, together with its Optional Protocol, which empowers the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to hear complaints of rights violations brought by individuals, is one of the main human rights conventions of the United Nations and an invaluable tool for implementing the provisions contained in the Platform for Action on eliminating violence against women. To date, 186 countries have ratified the Convention and 99 of those countries have ratified the Optional Protocol. The year 2010 marks the thirty-first anniversary of the Convention and the eleventh anniversary of the Optional Protocol.

10. The Convention's thirty-first anniversary provides an occasion to celebrate its near-universal ratification, as well as the recent progress that has been made at national levels to implement the Convention and make true gains for women's and girls' rights on a practical, everyday level. Because of this Convention and the provisions of the Beijing Platform for Action, several countries now have national action plans to combat violence against women. In addition, laws and policies are being adopted to strengthen women's economic security and rights in such vital areas as decent employment and access to credit and markets. But there is more work to be done. The leadership that has already been demonstrated should provide

a platform to support States that lack the knowledge, commitment or legal framework to fully implement the Convention within their jurisdictions.

11. Project Five-O therefore stresses the importance of the Convention to women and States on this thirtieth anniversary, calling on all Member and Observer States to ratify the Convention and its Optional Protocol without any reservations in order to help achieve the goal of a world free of violence against women, as envisioned in the Beijing Platform for Action.

12. Project Five-O supports the General Assembly of the United Nations on the unanimously adopted landmark resolution on system-wide coherence, resolution 63/311, which will lead to the creation of a strong unified women's rights and gender equality entity led by an Under-Secretary-General.

13. Recognizing that the fifteenth anniversary of the historic Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing plus 15) is approaching with many of its promises still unfulfilled, Project Five-O demands that progress on forming the new gender entity be visible by the time of the review by the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March 2010. We urge Member States to agree without further delay on a proposal and come to agreement on outstanding issues such as the governance of the new entity. We urgently request that donor countries pledge substantial funding to enable the $1 billion target to be reached in order to support the proposed strong field operations that the entity must have if the promises made by Governments and the United Nations to deliver results for women on the ground are to be realized.

14. Realizing the vital role that civil society organizations have always played in the work of the United Nations in women's rights, we urge Member States and the Secretary-General to commit to the systematic and ongoing participation of civil society, particularly women's organizations, at every stage of the process at global, regional, national and local levels.

15. We stress that, in order to deliver for women everywhere, there must be systematic and meaningful participation of civil society representatives in the governance structure, as well as in the operations of the new women's agency. Recognizing the critical importance of tapping into the grass-roots expertise of non-governmental organizations, the Gender Entity Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign has proposed the creation of civil society advisory bodies at the global, regional and national levels and has requested that a mechanism be developed for ongoing input from non-governmental organizations into the governance of the new gender entity.

16. Project Five-O calls on the Secretary-General to select a strong leader with significant stature, competence, credibility and experience in gender equality and women's human rights in order to ensure the necessary status required for representation and decision-making at the highest levels and to effectively drive the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda. The new entity should promote gender mainstreaming by the integration of gender equality and women's human rights throughout the United Nations and especially in the United Nations country pilots and in all the United Nations reform processes. We ask that the selection of an Under-Secretary-General take place before the intergovernmental negotiations in March 2010, in accordance with the selection criteria developed by the Gender Entity Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign for that post.

17. In conclusion, Project Five-O further calls on the leadership of the Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly and Member States to facilitate the intergovernmental process in an expeditious but effective manner in order to launch the new gender equality entity in 2010.